



## ACT Budget Submission 2017-2018

Families ACT is a peak body representing organisations working with children, young people and families in the ACT and surrounding area. Families ACT advocates to government on issues affecting these organisations' service users. It also provides information and sector development for members.

Our submission reflects input from our Advisory Council which comprises representatives from member organisations, our skills-based Board and feedback from our annual member survey. It is part of a continuum of advice to Government in terms of previous ACT Budget submissions and Budget responses.

This Budget Submission is underpinned by our concern about "a growing gap between those who enjoy Canberra's prosperity and liveability and those who don't." (Statement for the ACT 2016 Election <http://www.actcoss.org.au/publications/advocacy-publications/community-shared-statement-act-2016-election> )

We share ACTCOSS's concern that in the "ACT our high *average* outcomes conceal real disadvantage experienced by many at the *individual* level" (ACTCOSS ACT Budget Submission 2017-18).

As much as possible the ACT Government should be funding programs and services which have a preventive and early intervention approach to tackling disadvantage, as these deliver the best outcomes as well as being the most cost effective.

### Our Priorities

Our key priorities are increasing the availability of affordable housing, improving equity in education and addressing domestic and family violence.

#### Housing

For the past few years the community sector peak bodies have united to call for action on affordable housing in the Territory. Lack of access to affordable housing remains a key driver of disadvantage in the ACT. Without the stability that accommodation provides, any other services targeting disadvantage are likely to be ineffective.

We support all of ACTCOSS's Budget asks on behalf of the community sector relating to housing, and in particular that the ACT Government:

- Provide ongoing funding for the Supportive Tenancy Service.

- Divert \$100 million from its investment portfolio in bonds to create an investment fund for community housing providers for the purpose of building new accessible, affordable rental housing. The fund would be held in perpetuity and repaid at government bond rates.
- Sustain funding to Commonwealth/ACT joint funded programs under the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness, even if the Commonwealth withdraws funding AND Improve access to emergency housing.
- Request all directorates to report on how their roles and responsibilities impact on homelessness and the supply of accessible, affordable housing as part of their annual reporting requirements
- Require any directorate not already contributing at least one percent of their operating budget to housing and/or reducing homelessness to allocate one percent of their operating budget to fund additional measures that increase provision of services to reduce homelessness and increase supply of accessible, affordable housing.
- Provide seed funding to support development of partnerships between the private real estate industry and housing support services, including:
  - The Supportive Tenancy Service—to increase its reach into the private rental market, recognising the benefits of tenancy support to government, landlords, real estate agents and tenants.
  - The Human Services Gateway—to increase access to private rental market accommodation options.
- Apply the principles underpinning the Affordable Rental Scheme (that sets rent payments as a percentage of income instead of a percentage of market rent), currently open to people over 65 who meet an income eligibility threshold, to a wider group of low income households in order to create a system that could be applied to all people experiencing disadvantage in the ACT.
- Establish a Community/Government/Industry Steering Group to oversight and provide advice on implementation and evaluation of effectiveness of the Affordable Housing Action Plan.

## **Education**

Our interest in equity in education currently revolves around improved counselling supports for teachers, students and their families and students in the middle years (the years between 8 and 12).

We are aware of the parliamentary agreement to increase the number of school psychologists by 20 over 4 years. However, while we welcome the additional supports to schools, we are concerned that the system already favours psychologists as the professional of choice to provide this support, where other professions like social workers are equipped to perform most of the same interventions, but at a lower cost and with a focus on intervention rather than assessment. We remind the Government that while the Schools for All report does recommend additional psychologists, it also stresses the need to develop multi-disciplinary teams to provide optimum supports in schools.

Most importantly however we see a great opportunity to “invest in community services to increase their capacity to partner with schools and provide targeted intensive supports to young people and their families.” (ACTCOSS ACT Budget Submission 2017-18).

The middle years of children's development have been described by leading child development researcher Gerry Redmond as a period of "benign neglect", characterised by a lack of dedicated research data and critical gaps in funding for support services. Families ACT's members report that often children in the middle years are presenting with early warning signs, such as anxiety, which in due course manifest in more serious problems and lead to disengagement from school.

There is substantial literature indicating that the early years represent the best opportunity to intervene in a child's life to promote improved life-long outcomes. The middle years are the next best opportunity and we would like to see increased targeting of this cohort to promote successful transition from primary to high school.

### **Domestic and Family Violence**

The ACT Government's measures in the 2016-17 Budget to address domestic and family violence are important steps in the right direction to address this critical community issue, in particular the provision of ongoing funding to domestic and family violence services.

In our February 2015 briefing paper on Domestic and Family Violence (<http://www.familiesact.org.au/publications/>) Families ACT noted that the ACT Government has a wealth of local, current research and reports to guide its future interventions in this area. We echo ACTCOSS's recommendation that all of the recommendations and measures outlined by the Domestic Violence Prevention Council and in the Deaths Review be acted upon as a matter of priority.

### **Fit for purpose procurement framework**

If the ACT Government is to effectively redress disadvantage in the Canberra community, quality services will be the key. Families ACT is concerned about tensions between cost saving in applying a purely competition driven approach to procurement and providing quality services to children and families. We support ACTCOSS's call for the ACT Government to:

"Develop a fit for purpose service procurement framework that includes processes that engage directly with the community to ensure services meet expectations, improve quality, continuity, diversity and sustainability of both the service offer and the workforce."

The cornerstone of the procurement framework should be that Government is accountable to the community for the services they receive. This means that throughout the procurement process the quality of what will be provided will be the key determining factor in decision making.

In light of this "self-determination and community control [should be key factors] when evaluating organisations involved in the commissioning processes for the delivery of social and community services" (ACTCOSS ACT Budget Submission 2017-18).